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News Release



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U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE **DESIGNATES CRITICAL HABITAT FOR THE OTAY TARPLANT**

In compliance with a Court-approved settlement agreement, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service today announced it is designating critical habitat for *Deinandra conjugens* (Otay tarplant) on approximately 6,330 acres of federal, state, county and private land in San Diego County, California.

Critical habitat identifies geographic areas that are essential to the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and that may require special management considerations or protection. However, a designation does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve, or other special conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands and does not close areas to all access or use. Rather, its impact is that Federal agencies must consult with the Service on activities they undertake, authorize, fund, or permit that may affect critical habitat.

The Service has designated critical habitat for the Otay tarplant in three separate units, as follows:

- **Unit 1** includes approximately 3,560 acres north of Upper Otay Reservoir. A portion of this unit is on the Service's San Diego National Wildlife Refuge. Lands within the alignment of Highway 125 south have not been designated as critical habitat.
- **Unit 2** includes about 520 acres and covers the western portion of the Otay tarplant's distribution in the United States. This unit contains lands that are proposed as preserve areas under the City of Chula Vista's Draft Subarea Plan for the County of San Diego Multiple Species Conservation Program.
- **Unit 3** includes about 2,250 acres of land east of Highway 805 and north of the International Boundary between the United States and Mexico. A portion of land in this unit is managed by the Immigration and Naturalization Service and some of the land is proposed as preserve area under the City of Chula Vista's Draft Subarea Plan.

An addendum to the accompanying draft economic analysis was prepared that reflects public comments. The addendum estimates the total economic effect of the critical habitat designation, including those impacts that are co-extensive with the economic effect of listing the species, could range from \$375,000 to 466,000 annually over the next 10 years. This is likely to be an overestimate of the impacts, however, because the addendum was based on the original proposal of 6,630 acres.

Some lands within the Rolling Hills Ranch, Bella Lago, and Eastlake Woods residential developments, the Sweetwater County Park Summit site, and a portion of lands owned by the Sweetwater Authority were proposed as critical habitat but were excluded from the final designation because these areas were determined not to be essential to the conservation of the Otay tarplant.

The Service did not designate critical habitat on lands within an approved and implemented habitat conservation plans that include the Otay tarplant as a covered species. Therefore, lands within the San Diego Gas and Electric HCP, and the County of San Diego and City of San Diego Subarea Plans under the MSCP are excluded from this critical habitat designation.

When mapping the critical habitat units, the Service attempted to avoid lands that are developed, used for intensive agriculture, or that do not contain the primary constituent elements to support the plant. Due to mapping limitations, however, we were unable to exclude all such areas. Roads, buildings, agricultural fields and other features and structures within each unit are not considered essential to the conservation of the species and activities confined to those areas will not require consultation with the Service, unless they affect the species or its adjacent critical habitat.

This plant was listed as endangered under the California Endangered Species Act in November 1979. The Service listed the Otay tarplant as threatened, under the Federal Endangered Species Act, on October 13, 1998. At that time of listing under the ESA, more than 70 percent of the plant's estimated historic range had already been lost to development and agriculture.

A member of the sunflower family, the Otay tarplant grows from two to 10 inches in height and produces small clusters of yellow flower heads, with deep green or gray-green leaves covered with soft, shaggy hairs. The Otay tarplant is found only in areas that contain certain kinds of soils and habitats. Specifically, the plant is associated with clay soils and subsoils, and is found in grassland, open coastal sage scrub and maritime succulent scrub habitats between 80 and 1,000 feet in elevation.

The Otay tarplant relies on flies, bees, small mammals and birds for pollination and to spread seeds. Each of the designated critical habitat units support populations of the Otay tarplant and contain one or more of the primary constituent elements necessary for its life cycle needs.

Native plants are important for their ecological, economic and aesthetic values. Plants produce the oxygen we breathe and play an important role in development of crops that resist disease, insects and drought. At least 25 percent of prescription drugs contain ingredients derived from plant compounds, including medicine used to treat cancer, heart disease, juvenile leukemia, and malaria, as well as that used to assist organ transplants. The decline of plant species is an indicator of the health of the environment.

A complete description of our final rule to designate critical habitat for the Otay tarplant was published in the *Federal Register* on December 10, 2002. All supporting documentation used in the preparation of this final rule will be available for public inspection, by appointment, during normal business hours at the Carlsbad Fish and Wildlife Office.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System which encompasses 540 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 70 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resource offices and 78 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Aid program that distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.

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